

“U.B. Professor Raps Bias in Academia”

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After one of Dr. Michaels' foreign policy lectures at the State University of Buffalo, a wide-eyed student approached the professor.

“You're not a liberal,” she said in disbelief. “What are you?”

At UB, Michaels says, he “passes for a conservative.” As the history department's expert on Latin America, he often expresses political views that are far a field from those of his liberal colleagues. He describes himself, though, as a Truman-Kennedy Democrat who voted for Jim Carter in 1976.

His relative conservatism makes him an anomaly on campus, but it's never a big deal for him to express his views that raise a few eyebrows. Widely known as “Albie,” he is an eloquent speaker whose intellect is balanced with Puckish charm. With his small, neat features and roundish spectacles, he looks a bit like the man behind the curtain who pretended to be the wizard of Oz. That impression grows stronger during a trip to Michaels' home when two little terriers, the same breed as Toto, come bounding onto a visitor's lap.

His latest bit of original thinking concerns a particularly hot topic. Some conservative students secretly are monitoring professors for liberal bias in the classroom. The students are reporting their findings to Accuracy in America, a right-wing watchdog organization in Washington.

Professors and students alike are calling it a flashback to the horrors of 1950's McCarthyism. In panicky tones, they are talking about academic freedom: a professor's right to teach as he sees fit.

Michaels agrees it's wrong – “a terrible thing” – for students to record classes secretly. “I'm not sympathetic with these espionage tactics. Personally, I would be furious.”

But the alarmed reaction of his liberal colleagues brings up another issue, to him a more important one.

“Freedom of speech seems to apply to only one side: the political left,” he said. “The hypocrisy disturbs me.”

He has plenty of examples. There was the time when the university's Republican Club asked him to speak on political events in Grenada, a year after the United States invasion – or “liberation” depending one's point of view – of the island. The event in the quad outside Capen Hall was intended as a celebration of U.S. action in Grenada.

He never got a chance to speak, though, because a large group of leftist protesters – a “mob of thugs,” as he puts it – made so much commotion that he was not allowed to speak.

“Where is the freedom of speech in that instance?” he asks. “Not one faculty member came forward to say that that was wrong. Academic freedom seems to be one dimensional.”

Similarly, he notes, college students throughout the country are doing the same thing to the other campus speakers on the political right, Jeane Kirkpatrick and Casper Weinberger prominent among them.

Students sometimes suffer from the UB faculty's ideological bias towards the left, Michaels says. He recalls, for example, the recent case of a student who was warned by his liberal professor not to make any favorable comments about President Reagan in a paper on the Presidency. When he did, Michaels said, this straight-A student's grade for the course was dropped from an “A” to a “C”.

Similarly, he recalls hearing one UB colleague last year express a wish that the United States would experience a repeat of the Great Depression, so that Reagan would not get re-elected.

“I don't think anybody would deny that this bias exists,” he says. Is it necessarily bad?

“The defenders of the system argue two things, and they're wrong about both,” Michaels says. “They say that a student can challenge a professor's views openly in the classroom, but that is not true. Often a student's grade will suffer from that or he'll believe it will. And they argue that students are old enough to think for themselves – that they have the ability to critically evaluate the bias in what's being taught. That's not true, either.”

Given that bias, Michaels says, he's convinced that if the tables were turned – if liberal students were monitoring professors for right-wing bias – no one would be alarmed. His colleagues would believe that an acceptable way to keep an eye on the dangerous right-wingers, he thinks.

What's the answer? Ironically, Michaels says, the answer may be something that conservatives don't normally espouse: affirmative action. The hiring of more politically conservative professors would balance out the university's point of view.

As for the question of making sure the First Amendment extends to the right as well as the left, Michaels has no easy answers.

“Freedom of speech seems to be only for the left,” he says, “and I am deeply disturbed about that.”